

# “I Have To Tell You Something”: How Narrative and Pretend Play Intersect In Story Games

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we explore learning and play within the context of rules-light, narrative-focused tabletop role-playing games, colloquially called “story games.” Focusing on data drawn from the *Story Games Project*, we highlight exchanges within a game session of the game *Fiasco*, which illustrate a negotiation of roles and collaborative narrative construction among players. With an emphasis on *revoicing* and *pretend play*, we discuss implicit mechanics which guide the enactment of roles within the play of these games, as well as the means by which players learn to embody different identities through play.

## Introduction

In recent years, the field of games and learning has shifted away from studies of gameplay toward discussions of applications and outcomes. Games are, more than ever, seen as tools and teaching machines by which educators and educational researchers apply technological solutions to educational problems. But, for many games scholars outside of education-oriented fields, this can be perplexing, as the long study of play has rarely focused on overtly instrumental intent. It is within this context that we wish to dig back into analyses of game play, and form better understandings of how players engage with new forms of games. In particular, we focus on affordances and constraints of *analog role-playing games*, to investigate how games can provide potentially transformative learning opportunities with prosaic technological substrates (paper, pencils, and face-to-face interpersonal discussion). In this paper, we empirically explore the potential of the “story game” (see Duncan, 2014) — or rules-light tabletop role-playing game — for their potential impact on instruction, their ability to foster identity play, and how they may provide opportunities to create collaborative narratives. While digital games are seen as technologies for researchers and educators to “bake in” educational content and messages, we wish to broaden the field’s conception of games while developing an understanding of the unique affordances of these specific kinds of games.

By refocusing on what is learned and can be learned through engagement with genres of entertainment games, our goals are threefold. First, we wish to better elucidate how play in “the wild” (Hutchins, 1995) may give rise to learning practices difficult to engineer in a classroom. Next, we wish to see how non-digital games in particular may afford forms of interaction, play, and learning that are difficult to achieve in digital contexts. Third, we aim to gather considerations of these games’ applicability to instructional contexts. In this paper, we ask: How do we understand learning within generative, productive gaming spaces that involve role-playing and narrative construction? How does player identity play intersect with the needs of narrative play in non-digital games? And how do players see the instructional potential of these experiences?

## Narrative and Play

For the purposes of this study, we focus on narrative-based analog games in which players collaboratively (and potentially competitively) develop shared stories with one another. It could be argued that a troubling legacy of game studies’ so-called “narratology vs. ludology debates” (e.g. Frasca, 1999) was an over-consideration of game *mechanics* at the expense of player (and designer) narratives in the understanding of games’ impact. Recently, the pendulum has begun to swing back to considerations of narrative, with overt criticisms of recent emphases on “procedurality” in games (Sicart, 2011), including criticisms of an over-emphasis on mechanical, procedural factors in understanding how players (and scholars) make meaning from games. Within this context, the tabletop and live-action role-playing game becomes quite a provocative site to focus on — including both overt mechanics that shape the player’s activities as well as an ethos of narrative contribution by players, these games challenge us to new considerations of game collaborative narrative.

The study of role-playing games is often traced back to the groundbreaking work of Gary Alan Fine (2002), who applied Erving Goffman’s frame analytic approach toward the understanding of identity and the embodiment of roles within early tabletop role-playing games (e.g. *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Traveller*). Fine’s work has been extended and elaborated over the past decades, with a burgeoning field beginning to develop around the study of role-playing games in its many forms (e.g., Simkins, 2015; Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008; Bowman, 2010; Torner & White,

2012, to name but a few). Within each of these works, scholars have understandably emphasized *role-playing* as one of the game's central activities, as well as on the improvisational nature of the narrative construction that occurs within these gaming spaces. The term "story game" connotes a specific subgenre of tabletop role-playing game, characterizing multiple role-playing and gaming experiences (intersecting with categories such as "indie RPGs," freeform games, Nordic larp, and others). Tied often to independently produced, small press tabletop role-playing games and their designers (e.g., the work of Avery Mcdaldno, such as *Monsterhearts*, *The Quiet Year*, and *Dream Askew*), these games are often short in duration and involve much less in terms of mechanical calculation. Character statistics, where they exist, are often used primarily in service of forwarding the game's evolving story, and are thus much more limited than in digital role-playing games. Many games do not involve gamemasters, and most use prosaic gaming tools (six-sided dice, index cards) rather than specialized gaming tools typically associated with the hobby (e.g., polyhedral dice, miniatures).

At the same time that these games have risen in prominence, Anthony Perone and Artin Göncü (2005; 2014) have recently explored and advocated for considerations of pretend play across the lifespan. Göncü & Perone (2005) argue for considerations of *adult pretend play* and later *lifespan pretend play*, toward understanding how childhood developmental play activities extend into adult contexts. In recent work, Perone & Göncü (2014) have focused on better understanding improvisation as adult play, furthering argue that adult improvisers "desire to construct intersubjective, imaginative worlds in their activities" (pg. 204). These emphases sync well with other recent approaches promoting adult play as a political act (e.g., DeKoven, 2014; Sicart, 2015), as well as hint at their potential to promote considerations of alternative social futures (e.g., New London Group, 1996). Göncü & Perone (2005) provocatively stated that "when adults, like children, move into the illusory world of pretending, they are trying to understand something that they have not yet mastered in real life. In play, they construct a representation of this experience and test its applicability in real life" (pg. 144). We thus posit that story games provide interesting and potentially fruitful avenues for understanding lifespan pretend play, their relationship to the designed experiences of games (Squire, 2006), and their potential application in educational contexts.

### **A Case Study: *Fiasco***

In this paper, we present rules from an empirical study of play in one of these games: Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* (Morningstar, 2009; Morningstar & Segedy, 2011; Duncan, 2014). *Fiasco* provides an exciting site from which to study the creation of collaborative narratives in a role-playing environment. *Fiasco* can be set in multiple time periods and locations, but all games share the common theme of creating a salacious (and often hilarious) crime-oriented story in roughly the vein of a Joel and Ethan Coen film (e.g., *Fargo*, *Burn After Reading*, *Blood Simple*). During a single session, players create new characters, put them into untenable situations, and then watch as the characters' goals all fall apart in entertaining fashion. The game is playable in fewer than two hours, and is designed to be welcoming to new players unfamiliar with role-playing games.

Commonly considered one of the best "gateway" games in this genre, *Fiasco* is currently ranked the third highest of all role-playing games on RPGGeek.com, and was the winner of the prestigious 2011 Diana Jones award for significant contribution to the tabletop gaming hobby. *Fiasco* provides a simply structured but generative gaming environment in which to explore the adoption of roles, the generation of a collaborative-constructed narrative, and the potential of psychosocial moratoria (Gee, 2003) that can give players the opportunity to explore sensitive and/or taboo topics. Duncan (2014) elaborated in detail the ways that *Fiasco*'s mechanics structured and constrained role-playing and narrative play within the game, providing us with a unique environment within which to study the interaction of rule systems and pretend play.

With our *Story Games Project* as a whole, we have striven to balance several goals: The goal of assessing play-in-the-moment during the course of a game, understanding how players reflect on their play, and providing players the opportunity to share their own perceived connections between gaming activities and educational contexts. The present study thus reflects an attempt to move beyond game analysis (e.g., *Well-Played*; Davidson, 2008) toward exploratory empirical work that can document and systematically characterizes player experience, focusing specifically on opportunities for player learning present within generative, role-playing game experiences. With *Fiasco* as the initial locus of the project, we sought out and tracked the performance of multiple play groups.

### **Method**

The *Story Games Project* is an ongoing series of studies, investigating lifespan pretend play as structured through role-playing games such as *Fiasco*, *The Quiet Year*, *Monsterhearts*, and others. Focusing at the present on story games that promote role-playing and collaborative narrative construction, we chose to investigate play within single, one-shot games of *Fiasco*. Adult participants were recruited via advertisement posters, solicitations to undergraduate teacher education courses, and through personal contacts by researchers within local gaming

groups. Students with career interests in education and related fields were privileged for participation in the gaming sessions, within which players were simply presented with four playsets (settings and narrative seeds to begin the game), then asked to play the game. Subsequent to each gameplay session, players were prompted to debrief on the gaming experience, their experience embodying roles, creating a collaborative narrative, and their considerations of the educational applications of these games. While we have collected data from five gameplay sessions to date, for the present paper, we present a case study (Stake, 1995) of one play group, focusing on a critical moment drawn from a single gameplay session between a group of four adult players.

The play group included one man and three women (pseudonymized here as Adam, Betty, Catherine, and Diana), who were all college-age or older adults, none of whom had played *Fiasco* before and who only had limited experience with tabletop role-playing games. For their *Fiasco* session, the group collectively chose the playset “Regina’s Wedding,” which provided a game setting through character relationships, character needs, objects that would need to be incorporated into the story, and “moments” drawn from traditional wedding structures (the “Dude Party,” “The Gathering of the Clans,” “The Ceremony”). The rules of *Fiasco*, as the name implies, fosters stories based around disastrous and often comedic set of events, and “Regina’s Wedding” further focused this upon a wedding featuring a character named “Regina.” For the game session, all play was video and audio recorded, as were the post-game debriefing focus groups. Additional interviews were conducted with participants one week after the game session, in order to elicit further reflections on the game’s events. All gameplay dialogue and interviews were transcribed for analysis.

## Results

“Regina’s Wedding” provided the playset background for the group presented here. Within their play, we suspected that they would be faced with the tasks of learning how to negotiate and generate collaborative narrative, as well as balance this activity with the performance of new roles within the game. We present excerpts from the game’s transcript to illustrate an early moment in the session in which a novice player (Adam) was faced with his first significant choices in *both* narrative construction and character embodiment.

Early in the game, central plot points had yet to be established, including the nature of an unspecified, key secret that “Regina” (played by Betty) would be hiding. Additionally, Adam’s character was initially established as marginal to the central events of the wedding — Regina (played by Betty) was to be married to Abdul (played by Catherine), which was to be officiated by Joe, the brother of Abdul (played by Diana). Adam’s marginal position and relative inexperience with these games led to a difficult initial path to participation; in the following excerpt, Adam was encouraged and coached by the game session Facilitator (a member of the research team) as well as the other players:

**Adam:** I can establish [the next scene] or resolve [a scene others dictate to me]?

**Facilitator:** Yes.

**Diana:** [Gives away her dice, ending previous scene activity]

**Facilitator:** And what resolving a scene means is, like, you, you get to choose how the scene will end, but you don’t get to start the scene. So you would say something like ‘I want to see a scene between Hank and Regina...’ And then you’d give the die.

**Adam:** Okay...

**Adam:** I don’t know. [Long pause]

**Betty:** You do realize this is going to determine the rest of your life. [Laughter from whole group]

**Adam:** That’s what I’m saying this, is a lot of pressure...

**Betty:** Maybe we can just go around in a circle [Betty makes circular gesture with finger], and just do it...

**Diana:** Think of your relationship.

**Adam:** I want it... I want, I want... I want to do this one. [Quickly points at table near Diana; laughter from all]

**Diana:** Okay.

**Adam:** [Finger pointed at table, taking on a deeper voice] I have to tell you something.

**Diana:** Okay, okay.

Initially, Adam's reticence appears to be a factor of both learning the rules of the game system, but also a genuine struggle with contributing something of consequence to the story. Once he declares "I have to tell you something," gesturing firmly at the table near Diana, he abruptly switches into character, and begins to both dive into a character as well as impact the central plot points of "Regina's Wedding." Next, with both Adam and Diana fully in character:

**Adam:** All right. You're officiating this wedding, but you need to understand something. [Looks at Betty briefly] Regina used to be a man. [Betty bursts out laughing, doubles-over with laughter]

**Diana:** Dude, we all know that.

**Adam:** You guys all know that?

**Diana:** Yeah, man.

We see here that Adam first strives to connect with a presumably shocking plot twist — the secret that Regina has been hiding is that she was transsexual. This surprises Betty, who laughs at the surprise of the revelation, which is nearly *immediately shut down* by Diana, and reframed as insignificant. Diana's "Dude, we all know that" occurs immediately and quickly, decisively defusing the revelation from leading to further "shock" scenes with other characters. Adam builds on this with another attempt, reframing the original shock of the transsexual character reveal into a side reveal about his character's religious convictions and potential transphobia:

**Adam:** You guys don't think it's weird? You guys don't think it's ... wrong? God made... *Reginald*... a man.

**Diana:** [laughing] Well, you know, man, like, honestly, like, I... I just think that--

**Adam:** [deadpanning] This marriage is a farce.

**Diana:** [overlapping, unclear dialogue] I ...

At this point, there is narrative chaos as Adam searches for where to take this revelation, given Diana's pushback. Diana appears to not know how to react to this new religious revelation, and the discussion turns from being about Regina to a discussion of legitimacy of each character's potential *actions*:

**Adam:** You can't officiate it.

**Diana:** I... I can. I got a degree online and I have a piece of paper that says I can, all right? This is my first one. You're not going to ruin this for me.

**Adam:** I'll let you officiate my wedding.

**Diana:** You, you don't even have-- [unintelligible]

**Adam** [interrupting]: I *could* get married!

At this point, the back and forth between Adam and Diana appears to be a *negotiation* of the plausibility of Adam's character's claims, guiding both his character points, as well as evaluating their utility in the overall plot of the evolving game. After a first attempt to simply introduce Regina's past as a plot point fell flat, and then the introduction of a religious framework for explaining Adam's character's outrage seemed to face impediments, Adam and Diana eventually settled on a final solution that made sense for all:

**Adam:** Because Reginald took her! And left her. Broke her heart. I don't know, she's missing.

**Diana:** Did you just say Reginald took your woman?

**Adam:** Yes.

**Diana:** I think I need to tell Abdul about this.

Finally, Diana references and later continues to discuss the implications for *Abdul* (Catherine's character, who is engaged to be married to Regina, Betty's character) and is also the brother of Joe, Diana's character. Diana, guiding Adam into the other established relationships, validates Adam's final character choices and begins to build the further narrative with Adam at this point. Adam appeared to be searching for a narrative "hook" of some sort; "I don't know, she's missing" seems to indicate the tentative creation of a new potential non-player character to add to the narrative as well as a potential motivation for his character. But, with a question ("Did you just say Reginald took your woman?"), Diana prompted Adam for the first time, quickly moving to the consequences of that statement for Abdul in subsequent interactions in that scene. This short exchange between Adam and Diana reflects an interesting confluence between narrative and pretend play in these forms of games, in the sense that Adam simultaneously searches for both character points and narrative points to connect with the other players. Diana served as an arbiter of his contributions, evaluating their potential impact (presumably according to her personal tastes and goals) and eventually guiding Adam with a question at the end of the exchange. In the next section, we evaluate the significance of this brief exchange, and identify some of the factors that influenced the form that this interaction took.

## Discussion

First, we note this exchange as a means of isolating a microcosm of kinds of negotiation that take place during collaborative, face-to-face tabletop role-playing games. In this case, Adam (encountering his first opportunity to role-play this character and to shape the course of the game) found himself in a potentially uncomfortable position. He was unable to decide what to do in order to set the stage for his scene, as well as what he might subsequently *do*. The encouragement of the group notwithstanding, there appeared to be no apparent other game mechanics at play nor other scaffolds in the game that would easily guide him through this process; Adam was left to *choose what to create*, and how to create it with the group.

It is notable that Adam eschewed one mechanical element of the game that could have helped with this. He did not choose to "resolve" in scene above (indicated in the first excerpted line). "Resolving" is a mechanic within the game that gives all other players the opportunity to negotiate a scene and goal for the scene, with the player who is on the hot seat (in this case, Adam), left to "resolve" the outcome of the scene. Rather, Adam seems to have *wanted* to "establish" (create his scene), but struggled in how exactly to do this, perhaps implying an authorial pressure that comes with first performance in the game. With his stammering "I want it" statements, followed by "I have to tell you something," once he decided on the Regina revelation, Adam quickly moved into character, and communicated an important revelation to the group through a change in tone and action (pointing at the table). Adam created the solution to a *narrative* problem by adopting *his character* and jumping into the story, without much meta-discussion ahead of time.

Additionally, we see it as significant that, even with this uncertainty on Adam's part, Diana clearly resisted Adam's initial forays into exploring Regina's sexual identity. It is unclear why this was the case (Diana's distaste may have been with either the concept of imposing a transsexual character on another player in the game, or distaste with Adam's move to introduce character development that othered another character for shocking entertainment value). Regardless, it was immediately tamped down ("Dude, we all know that") and rejected as insignificant backstory. Within character, Diana acknowledged Adam's contribution to the story, but downplayed it unimportant for the existing story. Adam seems to have moved toward a *character explanation* next (his religious beliefs, as a means of justifying his narrative choice regarding Regina's secret. This was also tamped down by Diana, followed finally with the introduction of an ex (who was wooed away by Reginald), as well as a new motivation for Adam's character that could be tied to Abdul's character. In each of these cases, all activities took place *within character*, without discussion of the narrative by the other two players, and entirely within the framework of the established story. The frame of the game provided a pretend play space within which narrative became negotiated through the play activity.

Additionally, in these brief exchanges, we see Diana serve a role to *mediate* and judge the quality of Adam's contributions. While not explicitly put in that role by the game — Adam chose Diana to participate in a scene with him, the game has no "gamemaster" or equivalent role — she did serve to deflate several avenues of exploration (the shock of Regina's history, then the religious rationale for Adam's character's revelations). In particular, it is notable how, much like in overtly instructional contexts, Diana essentially *revoiced* (O'Connor & Michaels, 1993) Adam's contributions — "Did you just say Reginald took your woman?" — providing him with a new framing of his narrative explorations. Diana did this in a fashion that dictated the potential of future non-player characters entering the game, and its impact upon other characters at the table. These, again, were revoiced *in character*, and revealed the strength with which the frame of the role-playing activity itself may have been held with even novice players.

This final Adam/Diana exchange provides a window into the process by which Diana led Adam's narrative contributions back into the context of the earlier game. It was presented as a *question* — in essence, it was Diana asking, "Is this how you wish to contribute back to the story? How you want to connect this insight back not just to Regina, but to Abdul?" The work of revoicing served at once to validate Adam's contribution, as well as give Diana a means by which she could act to bring Adam's story back into the established narrative. The collaborative structure of this exchange is one in which Diana (ostensibly originally a secondary player) actually served a key role in gatekeeping appropriate contributions, then providing Adam with productive reframings of his contributions. In-character revoicing potentially provides players with a means to guide the play of others, to shape the narrative of the game, and to do so without breaking the role-playing, fictional frame of the game. Role-playing and narrative clearly intersect in collaborative ways within games such as *Fiasco*, with activities such as revoicing serving to communicate this collaborative intent with other players.

## Conclusions and Future Work

As we can see from this brief case, story games such as *Fiasco* may include the adoption of roles and identities that provide opportunities for players to take on positions within systems to create collaborative narrative. This brief exchange illustrates that while collaboration and identity play occur within these games, their evolution is not always as one might suspect from first look. While the rules of *Fiasco* place the player whose scene it is on the spot (in this case, Adam), these data shows the key roles that others play in assisting, guiding, and constraining the contributions of the featured player. By challenging and revoicing his statements, Diana served to guide Adam's novice contributions back to the themes of the evolving story, and to do so within the constraints (and frame) of the existing play activity. As Perone and Göncü theorized pretend play throughout the lifespan, we suspect there are contributions from game studies that can help us to better understand the ways that, for some adults, these gamed forms of pretend play are scaffolded by and constrained by game *rules*. While improvisation and collaborative writing may seem a difficult affair for many (as it initially did for Adam), games such as *Fiasco* illustrate the potential of role-playing, fictional spaces for providing players spaces within which learners can explore multiple identities, work with others to shape stories, and to do so through the collaborative, performative experience.

But, do players know that this is what they are doing? Are there ways to better instruct, guide, or provide spaces for reflection on the learning that may be occurring through these activities? As with many (or some might argue, *most*) games and learning interventions, our first inclination is to consider the ways that these games might benefit from guided reflection or some other kind of explicit instructional experience to alleviate problematic approaches to identity play that arise within the game. We hasten to note that Regina's transsexual revelation appears to have been meant by Adam to drive a story in a humorous way, while Diana may have seen this as belittling or offensive and stopped this direction from being pursued without better connection to existing themes in the story. We find these moments both exciting for their potential to provide means embodying marginalized experiences (such as gender identity), though we are also troubled about the educational implications of this blurry line between identity play and the replication of problematic stereotype.

Much of the joy of *Fiasco* is about *transgression* — being able to play characters that have great ambition and fail spectacularly (Duncan, 2014). The game's *ethos* of "failure play" is one that is intended by Morningstar to be playful, humorous, though one that can lead to simplistic stereotypes, just for the sake of keeping a story moving. It may take effort to reconcile these play spaces with existing instructional approaches with games, which typically seek to empower learners and provide opportunities to defuse the use of stereotypes. This circles back to our original framing of games in the introduction of the present paper: If games serve for many as "technologies" to deliver content, practices, and opportunities for assessment, then we need to think seriously about the means by which this content, these practices, and these opportunities are designed. If we wish to better understand the educational application of story games, then we need to understand the ways in which roles are chosen, and how narrative constraints give those roles meaning in the context of the collaborative story. Pretend play and narrative are enticingly intertwined within *Fiasco*, and in future work, we will further investigate how the *content* of the play activities are connected to representations of the real world.

Göncü & Perone (2005) stated that "pretend play does not give way to labor or games with rules," and our results do seem to support this claim. These game rules serve to delimit a space within which pretend play can thrive, with the important caveat that "games with rules" (or lack thereof) influence and facilitate lifespan pretend play in ways that demarcate potentially uncomfortable identity exploration in the "safe space" of a game. Our data also raises concerns about these forms of play as means by which games can potentially serve as vehicles for "identity tourism," allowing participants to replicate stereotypes of others without significant pushback from the game environment or other players. While games such as these serve to provide fascinating avenues for the expression of pretend play across the lifespan and its relationship to collaborative narrative construction, there is much still to be studied regarding these play environments and their educational application.

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